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DE RUEHCI #0071/01 0471306
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 161306Z FEB 06
FM AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0787
INFO RHEFDHP/DIA DHP-1 WASHINGTON DC
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RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0731
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0289
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RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR 0049
RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CALCUTTA 000071

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [SOCI](#) [BG](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: ASSAM STARTS STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONEERING

REF: CALCUTTA 00063

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On February 11 Congress Party Chairwoman Sonia Gandhi traveled to the Northeast Indian state of Assam to inaugurate her party's campaign for the May 2006 state assembly elections. Her presence reflected Congress' concern about retaining its hold on Assam, following recent setbacks in Bihar and Karnataka and the prospect of seat-losses in the West Bengal and Kerala May assembly elections. In Assam the main opposition parties, the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), are weak and fragmented, but Congress has also lost support from the critical Muslim community. In a brazen appeal to the Muslims, Gandhi offered to amend the Foreigners Act to prevent deportation of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants. Her visit was marred by violence in the wake of the death of a suspected United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) member in Indian Army custody (REFTEL). However, Gandhi quickly condemned the death, forcing the Army to apologize. The Congress government in Assam has been pushing the military to institute a ceasefire in its operations against ULFA. While the political situation is still very fluid two months prior to the election, it appears that Congress will lose its current outright majority, but will likely cobble together a coalition government in Assam. End Summary.

12. (U) Elections for the 126-member Assam legislative assembly are scheduled in May. Assam, with a population of 26 million, borders Bangladesh and Bhutan. Its highly diverse population suffers several ethnic insurgencies and persistent violence. The largest ethnic insurgent group, ULFA, demands a separate homeland for the Assamese and is listed on the USG's Other Selected Terrorist Organization (OSTO) list. In addition, a continuous influx of illegal Bangladeshi immigrants has swelled the Muslim community to 28 per cent of the population.

13. (U) Congress dominates the present Assembly with 71 seats, while opposition parties the Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) has 20, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 8, the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) 3, the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) 2, the All India Trinamul Congress (AITC) 1, the Samata Party 1, the Samajwadi Party 1 and Independents 19. Congress has remained relatively united. The main regional party, the AGP, on the other hand, is sharply divided. Brindabon Goswami leads the original party, while former Chief Minister Prafulla Mahanta leads a breakaway AGP (Progressive) faction. The BJP is

attempting to persuade the AGP to form an alliance, but so far has not been successful. Meanwhile Mahanta, despite some degree of popularity, is unable to build an effective organization with his (Progressive) party.

¶4. (SBU) The Muslim vote is likely to determine whether Congress can retain its majority. The Muslim community's importance has been magnified by a steady influx of Bangladeshi immigrants and Muslims presently hold 13 Congress seats in the assembly. Traditionally, Congress had been the party of choice for the Muslims as it protected illegal Bangladeshi migrants from deportation. Congress also supported the Illegal Migrants Determination by Tribunals Act (IMDT) of 1983, applicable only in Assam, which made identification, detection and deportation of foreigners in Assam incredibly complex and protected post-1971 illegal Bangladeshi migrants.

¶5. (SBU) Congress' relations with the Muslims suffered a setback in July 2005, when the Supreme Court ruled the IMDT unconstitutional. Assam, like the rest of India, is now subject to the Foreigners' Act of 1946, which requires the police to deport illegal residents. Muslims in Assam criticized the Congress for failing to support the IMDT in court and in November 2005, formed a Muslim political group the United Democratic Front (UDF). UDF Leader Hafiz Rashid Chowdhury (protect) said that the UDF is running on the slogan of "Anti-Congress, Anti-BJP."

¶6. (SBU) The Congress has tried to appease the Muslims by not enforcing the Foreigners Act and in her recent visit, Gandhi offered to amend the Act. According to Assam Congress Spokesman Abdul Khaleque (protect), the amendment would effectively bring the IMDT provisions under the Foreigners Act and again create special exceptions and a tribunal for Assam. Also on February 11, Gandhi visited BARPETA, which has a large concentration of

CALCUTTA 00000071 002 OF 002

Bangladeshi Muslims, and laid the foundation stone for a new medical college.

¶7. (SBU) Khaleque indicated that Congress' efforts have not been successful, as the UDF has established an alliance with the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), may soon conclude similar agreements with CPM and CPI, and is also in discussions with the AGP. Khaleque conceded that Congress would not hold on to its current 71 seats this election but claimed it would not slip below 60. Other contacts believe that Congress could drop to as low as 40 to 50 seats.

¶8. (SBU) The other complicating factor in the electoral politics is ULFA's continuing insurgency. According to post contacts, the state Congress' goal is to persuade New Delhi to stop army operations against ULFA because no party can win elections without ULFA's tacit approval. (Former CM Mahanta lost power in 2001 when ULFA turned from friend to foe, after he failed to prevent army operations against the group.) On February 5, the Indian Army detained suspected ULFA supporter Ajit Mahanta, who subsequently died in custody. That in turn resulted in the February 10 police shooting of 8 persons protesting Mahanta's death. Gandhi was quick to condemn the violence and compelled the Army to apologize. Analysts feel that the state Congress and ULFA are probably negotiating an understanding. ULFA would not want a BJP-led government in Assam, since the BJP-led GOI supported attacks on ULFA camps in Bhutan in 2003.

¶9. (SBU) COMMENT: Facing mutinous Muslims and persistent insurgency, the Congress party is struggling to maintain its government in Assam. While Assam is not a major state in the normal calculus of Indian politics, its loss to Congress would be embarrassing following the recent failures in Bihar, Karnataka and anticipated seat losses in West Bengal and Kerala. However, Congress' opposition seems very fragmented, which gives the Party hope. Although too early to predict the results, the consensus appears to be that Congress will retain power in Assam but with a reduced majority that will force it to go to other parties to form a coalition government.

